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Tag Days To Save The Caribou

Conservationists work to save a vanishing species by marking them in the icy waters

Photos and story by George Scotter

CANADA'S barren-ground caribou are getting their ears pinched these days. But the pinch doesn't hurt much and it might save the animals from eventual extinction.

Last year, after surveys showed the animals had dwindled from millions early in the century to about 200,000 now, Canadian Wildlife Service officials decided they had to know more about the migratory habits of the herds in order to set up conservation programs. And that's when they started pinching ears.

The pinch comes when animals are tagged with metal clips that hold bright plastic streamers. These streamers make it easy for conservationists to follow migrating animals from the air. Last year during late June and early July nearly 1,700 caribou were tagged in the tundra region of the Keewatin District, N.W.T. Here's how it's done.

Tagging teams in canoes wait at traditional caribou water crossings for the first animals to plunge into the icy waters. As the caribou approach the opposite shore, canoes powered by outboard motors speed out to intercept them.

The "catcher" in the bow of the canoe captures a caribou with a device that looks like an enlarged shepherd's crook. The struggling animal is pulled to the side of the canoe and is held against the gunwale by another man while a third clips on the tag and streamer. It takes less than a minute per animal and is done without injury to the caribou and nothing more than an occasional icy shower caused by flailing hoofs.

Calves are tagged in the canoe and taken to the shore to avoid any possibility of drowning or unduly long separation from their mothers.

The success of the program will depend on the number of tag recoveries from harvested animals and on the number of air and ground sightings. Radio broadcasts and bulletins written in English and Eskimo and Indian dialects are being used to publicize the program and to give instructions for returning the tags and reporting observations.

Special posters showing diagrams of tags and streamers were distributed to trading posts, game offices and R.C.M.P. detachments.

Specific aims of the study are to determine movement patterns of caribou throughout the year, the limits of summer and winter ranges, the amount of intermingling among various herds, the times and places of major caribou shootings, the animals' life span and possibly the differential in mortality between sexes and age groups.

The tagging of calves provides a distribution throughout the herds of a number of animals of known age, an important item for future research.

The people of Canada's North, the Indians and Eskimos, are expected to co-operate with authorities in the program as the drastic decline of the caribou has caused much hardship for the people who live off the land. At one time the animal provided them with nearly all of the essentials of life. Today it is used mainly for food.

Taggers close in on swimming caribou to hook animals and clip on ear marker with bright plastic streamer. Tags allow wildlife experts to study migration patterns, food habits and other factors relating to disappearance of caribou.

Struggling caribou is caught with large hook and pulled to side of canoe. Animals are caught and tagged at the rate of one a minute and are released without injury.

Fred Riddle, a trapper in the tundra, holds a caribou calf being taken to shore to avoid the possibility of drowning.

More pictures on next page

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Identifying red streamer flutters from ear of rapidly-disappearing caribou. Close to 1,700 were tagged in 1964.

Caribou hides provide shelter for Eskimos in the vast inland Arctic area. Animals provide food and tools as well. ◁

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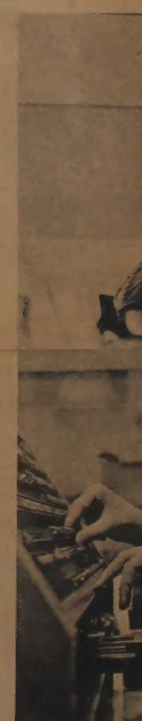

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